

This Paint Isn't for the Exotic

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
January 2015

Hermit crabs aren't child's play



never thought much about hermit crabs until I happened upon one on the street during a neighborhood walk.

Not knowing what it was, I squatted down to get a good look at the pretty, hand-painted shell. Its stylized floral pattern, in electric blue and Chinese red, showed a steady hand, but my eyes widened when suddenly little legs peeked out from underneath and it scurried away. *Why on earth did a crab have a painted shell?*

Visit any Miami pet store with a saltwater permit that carries exotics, and you'll likely see hermit crabs in hand-painted spiral shells for sale, sporting a variety of whimsical designs: superhero logos, cartoon characters, U.S. flags, soccer balls, and smiley faces.

In the wild, though, these creatures carry more natural works of art on their backs. Named "hermit" because they dwell alone in their shells, these crabs are really social animals. As they grow, they need roomier shells; so crab colonies form vacancy chains, switching shells as larger ones become available. Molting their exoskeletons under sand substrate may take weeks. They switch shells, and grow fresh exoskeletons inside their new abodes. They can live up to 30 years if left in their natural habitats.

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Their journey from wild environments to pet store shelves isn't a pleasant children's bedtime story. Hermies, as pet owners affectionately call them, are commercially harvested by the millions from tropical climates for the pet trade. The gastropod or snail shells that the terrestrial hermit crabs inhabit are also collected from their ecosystems.

These empty shells are airbrushed and detailed by hand, while the crabs are impatiently forced out from their natural shells. Prying them out can mean pulling off legs; smashing the shells off their backs or using chemicals to drive them out is damaging to these animals. Roughly stuffing them into painted shells causes injuries, as well.

By the time these little guys are shipped halfway around the world to pet store "crabitats," they've gone through the wringer -- as close to literally as one can get. This kind of stress, coupled with improper care afterward, can shorten their average lifespan by 95 percent.

They rarely breed in captivity, and because they are harvested before they're old enough to reproduce, entire ecosystems are often depleted of these necessary players. Those lucky enough to be left behind have to deal with a shortage of high-quality gastropod shells. They can't seem to catch a break.

Animal advocates such as PETA oppose supporting this industry, but serious hobbyists love their crabs and go all-out to properly care for them. They are the most vocal critics of hand-painted shells. These enthusiasts say sandy environments wear away the paint, causing it to flake into the crabs' food and drinking water.

In addition, paint and sealer can affect the crabs' ability to regulate the humidity inside their shells, putting these gill-users at risk of slow suffocation. Wet paint inside the shell can lead to them getting glued in. Just because they arrive in painted shells doesn't mean they have to remain in them.

There are 15 different terrestrial species, but the ones commonly sold here are the Caribbean Purple Pinchers and the Ecuadorian Hermit Crabs. In a crabitat of a half-dozen crabs, you need a constant variety of larger, empty natural shells. A good-size aquarium environment (five gallons of space for every two crabs) should be humidity- and temperature-controlled, with an appropriate mixture of sand and coconut shell substrate kept clean and at certain depths for

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molting.

You should also provide live plants, wood, and rocks to climb, as well as hollow logs and other hiding places, and separate shallow dishes of fresh- and saltwater with a natural sponge in each.

Care requirements for raising healthy hermites are substantial, yet the teddy bear-decorated shells I see indicate they're being marketed to young children. Some kids are mature and responsible enough to be good caregivers, but nocturnal animals that disappear for weeks as they molt might not be the best companions for them.

If your child does come home from a school carnival with one of these prizes, don't wing it -- do your research online. Petco stores hand out helpful care sheets as quick go-to references for new owners of these fascinating omnivores. One can get set up with a proper habitat for around \$200.

Sadly, that cute little fellow I encountered on my walk probably was a discarded arcade game prize. Policies against using live animals as prizes are slowly being implemented around the country. In central Florida last year, the Strawberry Festival stopped the practice, and the New York State Fair no longer has the goldfish-bowl ping-pong toss. California has banned it statewide. Hats off to our Santa's Enchanted Forest, which has recently said no to live animal vendor prizes.

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